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THE PUBLIC SCHOOL AS A SOCIAL CENTER

OLIVE E. WESTON

There is no American institution that wields so great a power for good as the public school. By the public school is meant the elementary and high schools, including the kindergarten. This great institution is really the most democratic of all our democratic institutions. It is the cradle of the deepest principles that underlie our government and our religion. In its conception it is no respecter of persons. The highest and the lowest may share alike its beneficence. Fame and glory in the public school, if that school be not in the clutches of politics and politicians, come to the one, who within himself, holds the elements of success and of greatness. The rich is as good as the poor in the public school, if he does his part and plays fair. A clean, bright, honest little fellow from the poorest hut, may sit or stand beside the millionaire's son whom riches and love have surrounded with luxury and beauty. If the poor boy be industrious he may even put the other one to shame in their mutual tasks. On the other hand they may be equally skilful and great chums in the public school. The rich man's son will throw himself into the water to save a drowning companion, though he be poor and unlettered, if he be a schoolmate. As the sun in heaven shines upon all alike, so the true spirit of our public schools would shed equal benefits on all its children.

Look at our night schools. Go visit them. You will see fine buildings warmed and brilliantly lighted from roof to basement, and every room open. Enter and you will think you are in classic halls. You feel like taking off your hat and moving with light step, for here you are in a great community where no one is idle or unhappy. All are doing what they love to do. Here is a white-haired man studying chemistry. He never had a chance when he was young, although he evidently had a taste for it.

Here is a boy who works down town all day in a factory. He comes here at night to study electricity, so that he may learn to understand the power that runs the great machine he tends all day. But look farther. Here are young men and old, middle-aged business men, girls and women, all too busy to see you. All these may for the taking, gather the riches of knowledge and study the law of the universe, without money or price. This is the public school, and instructors come here to give out the best they have, at this banquet of mind.

I wonder if we thoroughly appreciate and rightly understand what this great public school system is doing for the future citizens of our city and our country. It is high time that we make use of our opportunity and acquaint ourselves with it in all its phases; for instance: Let us inquire, How did this come to be a free school? Who is responsible for its excellence, and who may be charged with its failures? What is its purpose, and what does it accomplish? What is its curriculum and who makes it? Where do the teachers come from? Who are they and how are they prepared for this great work? Who selects them and on what basis are they chosen? What are the essentials of a good teacher? What is the relation of teacher and pupil, or teacher and parent? What are the responsibilities of the home and the school in the education of the young? What should the school do for our children socially? What is it doing now for this essential part of their training? What can we, fathers and mothers, club members, and thinking men and women everywhere, do to bring this greatest institution of our land to its highest function? How may we co-operate, and with whom shall we co-operate?

These are some of the questions that we should study with great care, and with deepest interest; and then proceed to answer them by doing something. Every father and all mothers are needed right now to seriously undertake the solution of these and like problems. The great trouble is that parents do not know their children. Then how can they be expected to know their needs, or how to meet them?

The home is the first and primary institution for the study and development of the child; but the school is next and very

close to it. Out of the heart of nature comes the raw material for the making of God-like beings. The home is the womb, where the embryo statesman, philosopher, scientist, artist, or great teacher and leader are nurtured. When the seeds are sown and the budding begins, the child is transplanted to the school or kindergarten to be developed or dwarfed as the case may be. Who should know so well what that school should be, and what it is, as the parents? In the home the process of absorption has gone on; the child has gathered sense-impressions and experiences by the million, each leaving its effect upon the child somehow and somewhere. Here emotions of all kinds have been awakened for the first time, ideals have been forming, aspirations and ambitions have been aroused and ties have been fastened to the tender heart. Now he goes to the school to develop all these into usefulness or to have them changed or crushed and killed. In the home he has learned to co-operate, to be one of a social fellowship, to think of others while seeking his own happiness; and if the home be a true one, he will have learned that the good of all is the good of each. At home he had first an unconscious, then a subconscious, will. He goes to school to become conscious of his growing power, and in proportion to develop a conscious will, a new force, a directive force. At home he has been under the direction of others. In the new surroundings he feels a desire for self-direction and the direction of others. This is legitimate. It is a needed experience in forming the man who may be able to take a high place in the world where such power is needed. We are said to be made in the image of God. The truth is, we are making ourselves into the divine image, and if the child has half a chance he will do it. God created the universe and directs all its forces, seen and unseen. To be God-like, man must be a creative being and learn to direct the forces of nature. To do this he must understand the laws of the universe. Watch any child and you will see the expression of this divine nature. With the discovery of his powers comes the desire to use them. He wants to make something, to test and manipulate all the materials and forces within his environment. He feels that he is surrounded by many wonderful forces and he longs to discover

them. He wants to touch, handle, and name everything he sees. This is perfectly legitimate. It is God-given instinct. Now what do we do? Why, we are inclined until we learn better, to combat and suppress all these instincts and tendencies. We are forever saying to the child, "Don't touch," "Don't try to do this or that," "Don't go here or there." Is not this true? The child feels a precious individuality within himself and longs to assert his inheritance. He attempts to be self-directive and we head him off and assume the directive power, and so dwarf his being. When we send him to school, he feels anew this impulse, and at once gets into trouble, because some one else who does not understand the impulse is unable to respond to his needs. You say, "He should learn obedience." Yes, if you can show this thinking being the justice of it he will gladly learn it.

In the public school, the little ones find ways of physical development in their free play, and the social instincts are easily satisfied; but about the sixth grade a great change comes over the whole nature. Not a sudden change, however, but at the threshold of adolescence the demands of the child are greater physically and socially, if not mentally. The creative power asserts itself in a new way; life opens up to the boy or girl with an intensity, which, if not understood is alarming. Now the child begins in earnest to study the law of cause and effect and to inquire into the relations of life. He asks for his own origin and would become acquainted with processes and causes. He or she as the case may be, chooses some confidential companion who is in the same state of mind, and together they try to solve the mysteries of being. Often they gather about them others of their own age and sex in segregation; clubs and fraternities are formed, and the legitimate business of their lives, which is to know and understand themselves, is often carried on in an illegitimate way. Parents, teachers, and friends begin to worry and try by hook or by crook to overcome and circumvent all this business, while all the time the youth are fortifying themselves against every attack. They even resort to the law and combat the powers that be with their own weapons.

Now, parents and teachers, this is your business; your duty

unveils itself at this point. What is the trouble? Is it with the home or the school, or with both? First of all, I think the responsibility is with the parents, to see to it that each child should be informed, should be enlightened upon these vital and natural questions. If possible this knowledge should come through the parents by a mutual study of the life of plants and animals. Watching the habits and methods of a few plants in their round of germination, development and perfection for one or two seasons, carefully noting the effect of heredity and environment, would awaken a deeper reverence in the heart of the child than any amount of preaching would do. Here is the basis of this plea for practical nature-study in all the grades of the public school. If directed in the right way it cannot be done too early.

Watching the process of development of the seeds, bulbs and flowers, the child will meet many vital questions which should be answered with great care, but truthfully and in correct and scientific terms. In all cases the universal laws of nutrition, self-preservation, and reproduction, should be pointed out, and when the interest seems to center in any one direction, the emphasis should be placed there. Inch by inch, as it were, the truth of the law of all life will work its way into the child's mind and heart. It is this law that the child is consciously or unconsciously searching for. When the interest passes over to animal life and human life, do not hush it up, but follow the lead of the question and when you come to the conclusion say "All life comes in this way, from a seed, which is life's cradle." Then when once you have opened the door, you must prepare to give your very best interpretation of life, and you may have to go to your *Encyclopædia Britannica*, your Darwin, Spencer, and many other heavy books, that you may give the sacred truth. But give it, and without delay. Children will not wait; they are immediate and exacting. They instinctively feel that time is precious. We know it is, and yet we waste it. Children observe and know much more than we realize, but they get false ideas, and it often takes years to correct them. Let us start them out with the banner of truth. "Know thyself" is a divine injunction.

When the time comes for definite questions, there should be

a carefully prepared course of study on the origin and the methods and relations of life. Every boy and girl ought to study such a course with an expert teacher. Small groups of girls who are friends, and groups of boys in the same manner, with an earnest, gifted instructor might thus be given the key to high thinking and lead them to right living.

If our schools should have nature-study as an essential part of the curriculum for every grade from the kindergarten up, with planting, tending, observing, and studying, with first-hand experiment, and all under the guidance of a lover and student of nature, the problems that so vex parents and teachers now would nearly all be solved. We talk down to children too often. Let us turn our faces upward toward them and borrow a little of their enthusiasm. All other studies might better be neglected than this. How they like the words "biology, chemistry, zoölogy, science," and all the rest. I asked a ten-year-old what he was having in school that was fine. "Chemistry of foods," was the prompt reply and he proceeded to enlighten me on the sugar and starch found in certain vegetables. I was not surprised at this because I know that children are interested in things related to life in a practical way. So would they be deeply interested in civics as a practical study. Witness how they love to plant and tend and harvest the gardens; especially the vegetables that can be taken home and used. Children are eminently practical, and there is no doubt that they would order their lives to live in harmony with the laws of life if they had the knowledge needful. The fires of the passions that are often uncontrollable in the boy, or girl, or the youth, being once understood might be turned to great account.

Instead of being a misfortune the possession of this power may become a great blessing. It is a fact that all great art, all great achievement in any direction is simply the output of this creative element in human nature. It is this deep surging sexual passion turned to good account that moves the world. Think what harm the steam engine might do if it were not well understood and controlled. Electricity would send the world to destruction if it were not directed under the laws of the universe

by man's intelligence. Now this wonderful force which makes so much trouble and breaks so many hearts is nothing more or less than a great electric dynamo. Shall we, then, keep the child in ignorance, or shall we give him his birthright and enable him to use it for making his way Godward? But how may we know when to lead him to this fountain of knowledge? Watch your child. He will teach you. When you see the self-consciousness, self-assertion and awkwardness that comes to every child; when your boy throws out suspicions and pugilistic tendencies; when he forgets to give you the good-night kiss, then be sure he is well on the way. He feels the change within him, a welling of something he does not understand. He is petulant, seems less loving, and less thoughtful for others; less obedient to individual authority. He wants to be alone or to go out with the boys; or if a girl, she wants to go to stay all night with her best girl friend. If a boy, he scorns girls, while perhaps in the secret recesses of his heart he feels, somehow, a deeper interest in them; studies them more closely, judges them more severely; scorns and loves them at the same time. He fixes his ideal of a woman far above any one he knows; seems to care for girls older than himself. In a thousand ways he is unconsciously telling you what is happening, if only you are able to read this wonderful book of nature.

In the moods and new manifestations of the young girl, she also is revealing the dawn of her womanhood and the wise mother will read the demands of this enlarging soul. The paramount needs for both boy and girl at this time are social needs. More than one-third of their waking hours are spent away from home and usually in school. Now what is the school as a social center doing for the child? First, and above all things, the school should administer to the social needs of the children, for only as he is related to the world as a social being can the child hold any place as an adult. Society is a unity and can be no better than the units of which it is composed. Each must find his true relation and contribute his character and work to bring the whole to a perfect unity. The school belongs to the fathers and mothers, and it is their responsibility to make the schools just what they should be. They are supported by the people. They were made

for the children and are the legal ward of the state, but the parents are the natural guardians of the institution.

The public school was not established for a source of revenue, but for a commodity far higher, viz. : for the making of men and women, noble and useful citizens. The Board of Education, the superintendents, principals and teachers are all agents or employees of the people. And from this point of view it is clearly seen that it is the duty of the people to look after this work of education; to see that all investment of money, time, and thought is made wisely and to the greatest good of the greatest number. The returns must ultimately be measured in character and ability.

Let me urge that this question of the public schools, especially the high schools, is the burning question today. It is the most important and immediate duty of every man and woman in the United States, especially in Chicago, to guard and manage well this inheritance of the children now with us and the children yet to come.

The true function of the American public school is to educate the people. It is the poor man's college, a preparatory school for the university work, and a place for social culture for all. It belongs to the children and youth in the morning hours, it should be the center of club and community life of the mothers in the afternoons, and a school for the workingmen, and boys, and women, five evenings in the week, and a true neighborhood center for the balance of the time. Like the institutional church its doors should never be closed. Library centers, art centers, and amusement halls of the highest character ought to be housed in our school buildings. In this way would be secured the greatest prevention of crime. The time has come when no man or woman can occupy a high place in the world's work, or in places of trust, who is not equipped with a fair education and a true sense of the relationships of the race. There is no way to find these relations except by living a life of interdependence. One must be in the spirit of giving and taking kindness and responsibilities, especially giving.

While the school makes excellent provision for the physical

development by manual training, domestic science, gymnasium and athletics, it should also contribute to that other side of human nature, the emotional side, which demands music and an all-round art training, rhythm, grace, in movement as well as thought. Grace, vigor and strength help to make the perfect man or woman. Again, all the race loves a story and loves to live over the experiences of the race. So dramatic art is a most essential element in a curriculum for the social life. The school building, I repeat, should be always at the service of the people. Parents should organize associations, and co-operate to cultivate a living spirit of unity, thus giving the children's growing powers the legitimate outlet.

Oh, fathers and mothers, open your eyes and see what great privilege is yours by fulfilling your duty to your public schools. The public school, I repeat, is your own business, and the public school buildings are your places of business. Do not neglect them.

Now that the time is approaching when thousands of little children, and older boys and girls will be turned into the street with nothing to do but learn vice and wrong, let us make a heroic effort to keep the school buildings open for business, and so enter into competition with the saloons and street corners. In this way we shall save our city from a generation of criminals. These little minds are eager to know, the hands are aching to do something, and the dear helpless mothers are begging us to save their children. Our recent terrible strike troubles that have cost so much life, happiness, and money, would never have been, if every one of these men had been thoroughly educated in the principles that underlie our public-school system. Every child saved from the street this summer will save ten times what it costs to keep him in the vacation school, for the street is the school of crime. Let us bond our city or do something to meet the expense of placing a vacation school in every public-school building.